Villager taught Clinton how to listen, evaluated our astronauts

By JERRY CARROLL Staff writer

Taibi Kahler and wife Shirl at home on Lake Balboa with their Chihuahua, Chi-Chi. (Jerry Carroll photo)

In his best-selling book *Primary Colors*, author Joe Klein described the obscure southern governor every reader knew was Bill Clinton and his unrivaled skill at working the line. It began with a handshake but the real action was with the other hand.

"He is a genius with it. He might put it on your elbow, or up by your biceps, these are basic, reflexive moves. He is interested in you. He is honored to meet you. If he didn't know you all that well and you've just told him something 'important,' he will lock in and honor you with a twohander, his left hand overwhelming your wrist and forearm. He'll flash that famous misty look of his. And he will mean it."

Then there was Bill's listening ability. "She was explaining her program and he was in heavy listening mode, the most aggressive listening the world has ever known ... as if he were sucking the information out of you."

The big man who taught Clinton the importance of connecting with people on this level leans back in his leather recliner in the house on Lake Balboa he shares with his chic wife of 11 years, Shirl. A tiny Chihuahua balanced on one knee, he remembers his first meeting with the Clintons in 1984.

"Hillary called and said we've heard you're a communications person," said Taibi Kahler. The brainy intellectual style Bill honed at Georgetown, Yale and Oxford wasn't cutting it with women, polling showed. They wanted fewer facts in his speechmaking and his one-on-ones. They wanted a feel for the man.

Talbi Kahler kicks back with Chi-Chi i his Village home.

By then Kahler was a globetrotter, delivering seminars to corporations, governments and nonprofits on how to discover innate personality styles with the aim of communicating more clearly with others, from kids to bosses.

He built on the Transactional Analysis model created by fellow behavioral psychologist Eric Berne to come up with what Kahler called the Process Communications Model.

It holds that by the time someone is seven years old, one of six basic personality types are fixed for a lifetime: Reactor, workaholic, persister, dreamer, rebel or promoter. None is better or worse than another and every personality combines elements of the others.

Back in 1984, Kahler spent three days with the Clintons and six or eight of the governor's staff explaining the model and how to use it. Personality types are discerned by picking up on words, tones, gestures, postures and facial expressions.

"This explains why people often know instinctively if we are honest, trustworthy, exciting, dull, hostile, successful or competent - even before we have demonstrated those specific characteristics," Kahler explains.

He told the Clintons that Bill's penchant for persuading with facts and logic wasn't only striking out with women - 75 percent in a category where feelings dictate response is female - but with a quarter of the male population as well.

Kahler jumps to his feet to demonstrate how to shake hands to establish a deep connection with another. His hand fully encloses the other person's and the free hand locks both as his face and eyes show his attention is focused and ready for total understanding.

The effect is what Klein described in *Primary Colors.*

Kahler was watching Clinton in a town hall debate with Bob Dole in the 1996 presidential campaign when Kahler saw his student had taken this to a whole new level. An elderly black woman began to weep when she talked about her fears of children going to bed hungry.

Dole, a charmer in private but stiff in public, dryly said no kids should go hungry and ticked off facts and figures. "He gave us good information and his strong beliefs, but the camera showed her disappointment," said Kahler. The woman wanted her feelings validated.

When it was his turn, Clinton walked to her, knelt alongside, took her hands in his and said he understood her feelings because he had a daughter and he never wanted her to go hungry. It was an Oprah moment.

"It's not a manipulation," Kahler insists, "It’s a language." Think of it as an elevator moving between six floors, each floor requiring a different way of talking and acting to get through to the residents."

"Talbi Kahler is a genius," Clinton later said. "He knows more about personality dynamics than anyone I know in the world." George W. Bush could benefit from some tutelage in this area, but Kahler guesses he would be a hard sell.

The fresh-faced psychologist looks 20 years younger than his 62 and is friendly and ebullient, a rags-to-riches story like Clinton himself. "My father didn't come back from World War II."

A photograph hangs on the wall of a corridor leading to a sumptuous playroom with a pool table and three rows of leather chairs and a big movie screen. The photo shows a shabby Indiana home where Kahler was raised. "I had two paper routes when I was 12."

Clinton wasn't exaggerating when he called Kahler a genius: The 6-foot, 5-inch psychologist has an IQ of 180. That intellect harnessed to workaholic habits and an Eagle Scout background probably made some kind of good outcome inevitable.

But he says brains aren't everything. "Thank God people nowadays are talking about emotional intelligence and not just cognitive," he said.

He worked with psychiatrist Terry McGuire, the head shrink for NASA for 40 years, to develop ways to evaluate prospective astronauts. McGuire's interviews lasted three hours, but he noticed Kahler put his pencil down after 10 or 15 minutes, already having reached his conclusion about a candidate.

"He thought it was magic," Kahler said with a laugh. He says it's possible for people to fool him. But not for long.

According to his model - it now has a database of a million people who have taken the personality test - those who combine workaholism and persistence make the best astronauts. They are organized, know their goals and work long and hard to realize them.

They were 93 percent of the astronaut population in the beginning, but that may fall in the future as space stations become more important.

The workaholic-persister type is a perfectionist, highly critical of others and driven to impose his views on coworkers. Other types more driven to please other people will be needed for greater harmony on long missions.

"This is a great opportunity for women to break through the glass ceiling holding them back in space travel," said Kahler.

The Soviets made the mistake of pairing a nose-to-the-grindstone persister with someone with a rebel's personality. The space mission had to be aborted early because the rebel broke off a needle in the other man's arm taking the daily blood test and infection followed.

"Talk about getting under another person's skin," Kahler chuckled.

"I would trust him with my life or my wife," McGuire wrote of Kahler in a forward to a book. "I have never seen him use his prodigious intellect to put someone down or impress at someone else's expense."

The regard is mutual. "I knew him 10 years before I realized he designed the first high-altitude spacesuit and external heart difibulator," Kahler said. "If you didn't ask, you'd never know he was with NASA."

Kahler and his wife moved to the Village two and half years ago from North Little Rock after a first visit to check out a timeshare possibility. They bought the home of Realtor Jane Hollansworth, whose husband John once kept classic cars in what is now the Kahler's playroom and home theater. Like everyone, the Kahlers love it here.

They have two adopted sons in their twenties and he has a stepdaughter by another marriage. The Kahlers are scuba diving this week in the Bahamas.

Kahler is a German name and someone in one of the genius IQ societies he belongs to told him his unusual first name has Arabic roots. "It means I'm in a good place and I hope you are, too."

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